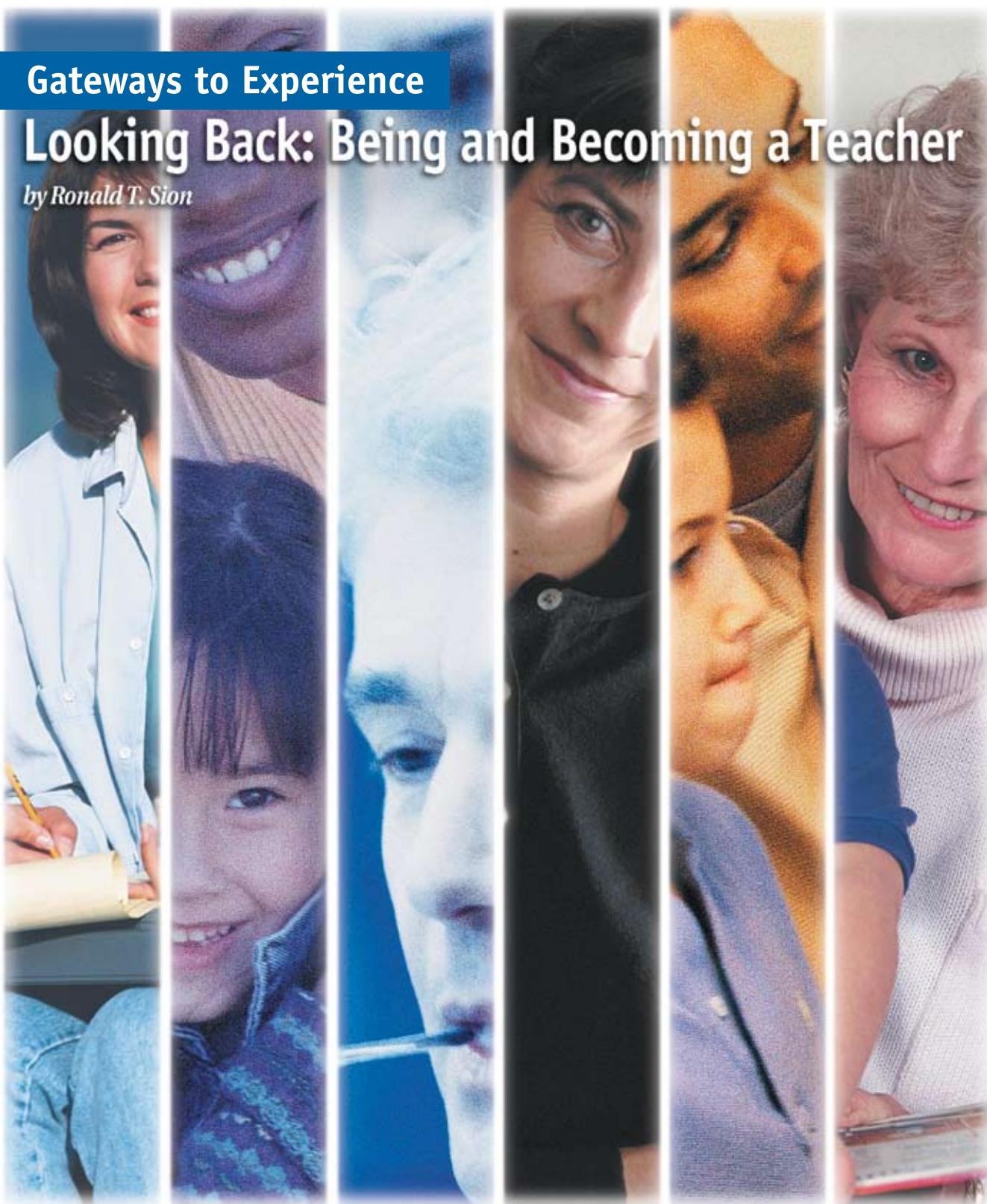


Gateways to Experience

Looking Back: Being and Becoming a Teacher

by Ronald T. Sion



What happened to John Smith?"

"Oh, he retired after 33 years here. Can you imagine that? I have taught for only six years, and I can't fathom doing this for 27 more."

"Oh, but you'd be surprised. They go by so quickly?"

"I suppose. Is that true for you, Ron?"

"Oh my, yes, you better believe it! You may realize today that it is six years, but the next

thing you know—bang, it's 12 or 15 or 23, as it is for me. You don't know how it happens, but it does."

Thus went the gist of a conversation in the English Department Office of Cranston

High School East in Cranston, Rhode Island, among the copier machine repair person, a colleague, and myself. The repair person was inquiring about the former English Department chair who had retired over the summer. Distracted from the papers I was correcting, I was drawn into the conversation by my colleague's question.

My response got me thinking: Twenty-three years—where did they go? What do I have to show for such a significant investment of my time? And, more importantly, what would I consider to be the benchmarks of that experience, which I would pass along to others who are entering the profession? These are provocative questions that now occupy my psyche and move me to explore their import.

Where Did They Go?

It is difficult to say how anyone deeply involved in any profession experiences time on the job. In teaching, especially, the school year is divided into quarters and marking periods, and highlighted by special events and vacations. Somehow the year marches along at a rapid pace that seems to accelerate the longer one is in the profession and becomes classified as a tenured educator, a veteran, or middle aged. Does time actually move more swiftly as one ages? I'm not sure whether that concept can be measured quantitatively; but qualitatively, the pages of my calendar appear to have taken on a life of their own, turning briskly as the breeze filters through my classroom windows—a breeze that has

taken on the spirit of a twister over the progressing years.

Ever conscious of time—because each year's syllabus has so much more to accomplish—there just never seems to be enough to do it all. This English teacher has struggled eternally to juggle an analysis of outstanding literature with the sundry other aspects of the curriculum and the designated standards. I never have experienced a day, however, when the periods were too long, when I have done everything that I wanted to do, or when boredom has set in. Twenty-three years later, I love what I do even more now because I have become better and better at it. Secure, confident, and unimpeded by self-consciousness, I jump headlong into the content and form of my craft. Is it any wonder that time seems to go by so quickly?

What Do I Have to Show for It?

As far as the second question—what do I have to show for it?—this almost begs its way out of a simple response. The teaching profession is just that to me—a profession. Far from being a means of merely providing a livelihood for me and my loved ones, it has endowed me with a sense of purpose and meaning. Perhaps akin to a doctor or a nurse or anyone else deeply involved in the service sector, I am a teacher; and, as such, I am defined by what it means to be one. All that I think and do is determined by the professional role that has become part and parcel of my being.

I could be driving down the street, taking a leisurely walk in the snow with my dogs, or watching a television program, and—Pow!—a new concept pops into my brain about how I can approach the teaching of *Macbeth* or poetry or whatever else is on the agenda. I attend a workshop and experience a novel pedagogy that I can't wait to try out on my students. I read an article in an educational journal, and I'm excited by the possibilities it offers. I attend a department meeting where best practices are shared, and I'm excited by the initiatives. I feel that I am ever growing as a person because teaching is so much of a people-oriented trade.

Though perhaps an unusual answer to the question, what I truly have to show for my years of service in the profession is a sense of self-actualization: I know who I am and what I am all about. Hence, I have an indelible element of peace, security, and purpose to my life that has become the very fabric of my being.

One of my major concerns as I contemplate retirement is: How do I leave or replace this indelible persona? After all these years of total submersion, how can I leave it all behind or feel true meaning in my life without it? One thought is to find an outlet to pass along

Ron Sion has taught English to every level of student at both the high school and college level for more than 20 years. He currently teaches full-time at Cranston High School East and as an adjunct professor at the Rhode Island School of Design.

what I have acquired. Reflecting on my passion for my craft in writing is one outlet. Perhaps teacher education programs at local colleges or universities would inspire education aspirants if someone like me were to visit their classrooms. Far from being an old fogey, tolerated for his age but without a connection to reality, I see myself as a valuable resource and funnel of information. Maybe I could help rouse a new generation into implementing the educational reform that did not take place while I was on the job.

Benchmarks of Teaching

A last, but most important question is: What have been the benchmarks of these years of teaching? What advice would I give to those entering the profession? Ironically, my answer does not come from a textbook, a course, a college professor, or the content of the subject that I teach. Though I have taught English for 23 years and have a portfolio of successful lesson plans, no matter how enriching these experiences have been—and students have come back to visit and thank me for preparing them for college or providing them with the means to hone their skills—the enduring benchmarks really fall into the category of enriching life experiences. And so I share just two of them.

Each Friday afternoon during my first few years of teaching, a group of us—mostly single and new to the profession—would get together after school at the local watering hole. Many evenings we would end up at someone's apartment for an

impromptu dinner. The hours of discussion we shared, in many ways, changed my perspective on what I do, why I do it, and how I should go about doing it. Some of our conversations were “way out there” and idealistic; but the energy, enthusiasm, and logic of our arguments provided me with the means of articulating my successes, failures, and frustrations as I tried to come to terms with who I was and what I was all about. Our collegiality bound us together in friendships that lasted many subsequent years.

When I later moved on to another school, I kept in touch with my former coworkers while a new band of collegial friends developed. Of course, it is possible to establish professional relationships on the job and to engage in meaningful pedagogical discussion in the teacher’s lounge. These relationships don’t necessarily have to spill out of the school’s walls into one’s social life. Whatever the circumstance, I would advise those new to the profession to be open to colleagues. Ask them questions; pick their brains. Those that surround you may be in different disciplines and have distinctively varied views of their profession. Nevertheless, seek out the ones with a positive outlook and engage them in conversation. They have so much to offer for your professional growth.

The second benchmark experience of my years of teaching will forever remain with me because it breathes life into my essence as a teacher. Journaling, in a variety of formats, has been an essential ingredient of my instructional strategy for

many years. I have used journals to allow students to express themselves freely in written form outside of the confines of rigorous grammatical evaluation. Today, I still use a journal, for example, as a means of closure to a class session when I ask students: “What have you learned in class today?” During my first years of teaching, I ambitiously collected journals weekly and read each entry. When I found myself spending all my free time reading journals from five class periods per day, I revised this procedure to make room for a life outside of school.

As years passed, I modified the use of journals periodically as appropriate. Here is one procedure that worked well for me: Students were to write an entry each evening, and once a week I would collect journals to see that they had completed all five. I would not read the entries unless a student indicated with a special marker that he or she wanted me to read an entry and comment. A young lady in my sophomore English class, who was bright but very shy, always flagged one. Each week the entry became longer and more detailed, and intimated a death wish blended with indications of sexual abuse from her childhood that were deeply affecting her. Though I assured students that confidentiality always would be maintained in reading their journals, I asked to meet with her and explained that I was required to report what I had read to the proper authorities. She seemed relieved that I was going to take action, and I did so immediately.

Subsequently, a full inves-

tigation transpired and, at her request, I freely offered my time after school to assist her in any way that I could, including attending a number of meetings with parents and counselors.

Jane, as I will call her, appreciated my presence and concern. By the time Jane graduated, her whole personality had transformed. She carried an air of assurance to match her intelligence. She came back to visit me regularly during her college years, and then she moved out of state.

One recent Christmas, I received a letter from Jane. She now is a mother caring for her own daughter. In her correspondence, she expressed that through the years I was always with her when she needed to accept a new challenge or make a difficult decision. On these occasions, she wrote, she would reflect and imagine my face and voice beside her. She indicated—in words that moved me to tears—that I was her lifelong mentor, and I would forever be a part of her life.

Final Thoughts

What a profound message and experience. I am certain that many seasoned educators have had similar experiences. Nourished by this benchmark, I offer the following advice: Realize that how you respond to the lives entrusted to your care may be the very seeds of an epiphany. To this day, Jane's face and the words contained within her letter remain a daily part of my reflection as I look into the visages of other Janes and Johns who are probing, reacting, and interacting with me daily.

In *As You Like It* by William Shakespeare (1980, 2.7), Jaques declares these immortal words:

*All the world's a stage.
And all men and women
merely players.
They have their exits and
their entrances,
And one man in his time
plays many parts.*

Likewise, Lewis Mumford (1978, 184) in his amazing treatise *Transformations of Man*, described humanity's journey upon this earth as one in which each person begins as a pure player upon a stage—distinct from his animal colleagues. Each person, in turn, assumes the roles of scene painter, stagehand, costumer, makeup artist, and actor until, one day, discovering ultimately that his or her "main function is to write and direct the drama."

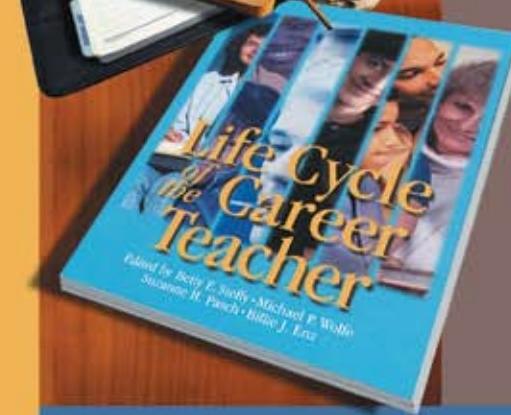
Mumford's or Shakespeare's analogy easily can apply to those involved in the teaching profession. Each person may dress in different robes as he or she assumes distinct roles during a personal or professional journey. I find myself in Act Four of my drama, contemplating my exit; in control, I now write my own script and direct my own scene.

Retrospectively, I can state without qualification that the journey has been amazing, for I know of no more noble profession that enriches and nurtures a person more than the one within which I am engaged. That is the essence of my being and my becoming as a teacher; my earnest hope is that those pursuing this extra ordinary career may come to know a similarly rewarding experience.

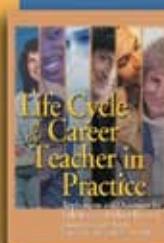
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